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## Re-membering water: community water politics and new materialisms

Órla O'Donovan

### Introduction

In community struggles over water, privatisation, and the commons, we often share words but speak different languages, resulting in different understandings of the problems we are trying to address and strategies for addressing them. This introduction to the Special Issue begins by considering keywords in community hydropolitics, giving special attention to *water*. In tracing various senses in which a keyword is used, following Raymond Williams' highly influential book *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983, p. 15), I show how the 'problems of its meaning ...[are] inextricably bound up with the problems it [is] being used to discuss'. Keywords are socially prominent, but also contested, words in contemporary public debate. As explained by the Keywords Project,<sup>1</sup> which was inspired by and has updated Williams' work, failing 'to grasp the complexity of a word can lead to cross purposes and confusion in public debate as well as in personal conversation'. Investigation of keywords involves tracing historical changes of meaning, but also multiple concurrent meanings and the political nature of those meanings. It brings attention to how certain meanings of words are part of broad worldviews or perceptual landscapes, as illustrated in the classic post-development and feminist counter-dictionaries *The Development Dictionary. A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (Sachs, 1992) (that will be discussed later) and *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Daly, 1987). Commenting on the contradictory and confusing understandings of *the commons*, Erik Swyngedouw (in Wagner, 2012, p. 635) argues that 'the cacophony of ways of imagining and/or theorizing as well as institutionally configuring the commons, in both scholarly and public imaginaries, posits precisely the (disavowed) political nature of 'the commons''. Keywords analysis recognises that words, as symbolic resources, are something we inherit, but also the definition of their meanings is bound up with power relations and uses by different social groups of speakers and writers, for different purpose. But we do not only inherit words and meanings; the crafting of new ones can form part of the crafting of new politics.

At first it might seem easier to see how *privatisation* and even more so *the commons* are 'chaotic concepts' (Swyngedouw in Wagner, 2012) and to assume that *water* is more straightforward. In point of fact, while *common* and *private* made it into the list of words discussed in the first 1976 edition of Williams' *Keywords*, *water* did not. Interestingly, Williams' entry for *common* traces a shared history of the keywords *common* and *private*. He starts by noting the Latin origins of *common* which refer to togetherness, but under obligation. This meaning saw the merging of common with community, to refer to an organised body of people, a specific group, or all of humanity. Questions about the scale and reach of the common have been raised in respect of the meaning of the *water commons*, a term used in the Italian water movement, where sometimes it is used to refer to water as a commons of humankind, but other times to refer to water as a commons of specific localities

(Carrozza and Fantini, 2016). Over time, common came to be used pejoratively, and became an adjective and noun of social division used to signify a subordinate group. Williams points to the significance of the insistence of members of the Parliamentary army in the 17th century English civil war that they were *private* rather than *commonsoldiers*, indicating the prevalence of a derogatory meaning of *common* at that time. But the overlap between the words *commons* and *community* and their astonishing range of meanings are familiar to readers of the *Community Development Journal*. ‘Commons Sense. New thinking about an old idea’, the 2014 Special Supplement to the *Community Development Journal* includes a number of commentaries on the meanings and connections between the commons and community (Mies, 2014), and between commons movements and community development (Shaw, 2014; Van Laerhoven and Barnes, 2014). Additionally, a number of different meanings of the commons are considered, including the commons as anti-capitalist (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014) and as republican (Wall, 2014).

David McDonald, in his contribution to this Special Issue, reviews a complex and contradictory assortment of meanings of the commons and remunicipalization, terms that are now frequently articulated in water anti-privatisation struggles internationally. For some, contestation about privatisation and the commons are disputes about what kinds of property regimes work best, public, private, commons or combinations of these. However, there are also multiple meanings attached to anti-privatisation. As will be seen, for some water activists, it is illusory to think that water can be owned or privatised. For others still, anti-privatisation struggles extend far beyond questions of ownership to contestation over what constitutes justice, sovereignty, democracy, community, nature, the good life and the very idea of the individual human being.

But I will consider how *water* too is a fluid word and the political nature of its meanings. I begin by discussing the work of various social movements and instances of collective action mobilized around water, and theorists who have emphasised the urgency of both *remembering* and *re-membering* water, a distinction that is explained below. Drawing in particular on Ivan Illich’s (1986) short book *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* as a wellspring of ideas about historical shifts in the meaning of *water*, I discuss the implications for community hydropolitics of going beyond the prevailing meaning of water as H<sub>2</sub>O, a meaning popularised by the modern science of chemistry. I follow Illich’s argument that how water is perceived reveals the perceptual landscape of a given age. Illich’s history of the meaning of water is very much in keeping with Williams’ (1983, 17) approach to keywords in which he emphasises that we can trace ‘changes which are marked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning’. Water is one such word with historical nominal continuity, but radically variable meanings. This radical variability is explored in this Special Issue, which ranges over meaning of water as H<sub>2</sub>O, a natural resource available for human exploitation, to water as a quintessentially communal substance flowing between and connecting our watery human and non-human bodies, as understood by hydrofeminists such as Astrida Neimanis (and discussed in the contributions by Róisín O’Gorman and

Patrick Bresnihan). In this latter meaning, we are intensely interdependent and interconnected with other bodies and bodies of water, and the idea of the sovereign subject is undone. The meaning of water as a quintessentially communal substance is associated with the perceptual landscapes known as ‘new materialisms’ (sometimes used interchangeably with ‘posthumanisms’), an eclectic range of philosophical perspectives that emphasise the interrelatedness of beings and things that have gained saliency in recent years. From these perspectives, matter such as water is not as modern neoliberal thinking would have it (i.e. a passive, inert resource) but is vibrant and agential (Bennett, 2009, Smith, 2017). Importantly, and as emphasised in many of the articles in this Special Issue, this worldview that emphasises interrelatedness has not just emerged from abstract postmodernist theorising but also from the sciences, such as physics and neuroscience, and from community-based (often ‘Indigenous’) movements mobilised around water and impelled by the unprecedented human-induced environmental disasters of our time. The recent Dakota Pipeline protests (discussed in the articles by Cleo Woelfle-Erskine, Patrick Bresnihan, and Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan in this issue) serve as an example of this different way of thinking about water and doing water justice politics.

Such attention to rethinking the meaning of water might seem unwarranted in a time of abjection of vast numbers of human beings, including through intensified austerity-led ‘rituals of public degradation’ (Piven and Cloward, 1971). Could it potentially reproduce the severing of class and environmental politics so evident in the recent ‘water wars’ in Ireland (discussed in the articles by Cristy Clark and Patrick Bresnihan) that saw anti-austerity opposition to the introduction of domestic water charges pitched against supporters of market environmentalist logics used to support the introduction of the charges? How can class, gender, anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles be advanced by new materialist politics aimed at multi-species ecojustice? And what precisely does new materialist water politics entail? As raised by Michael Hardt (Davis and Sarlin, 2012), given that the tradition of political theory we have inherited emphasises decision-making by the liberal individual, what does a non-sovereign social decision-making look like? Questions have been raised about the emancipatory potentials of new materialist politics, and the possibility of it undermining the force of older, especially Marxist, materialist positions. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden (2015) are amongst those who reject such critiques. For them, new materialisms constitute a positive move towards a more inclusive and less parochial politics and social science. Do they also offer a potential move towards a more inclusive and less parochial community development?

### **New politics, keywords and slogans**

New materialist perspectives encourage us to think about water as something radically different to H<sub>2</sub>O. In Patrick Bresnihan’s article, which draws on discussions that took place during the Thinkery he, Mark Garavan and I organised in Cork in 2017 and from which this Special Issue emerged, he calls for ‘ways of imagining and doing water politics that begin by paying greater attention to water and our complex, uneven, and damaged relations with it’. He and some other contributors to the Special Issue trace how water anti-privatization

struggles and water commons are fundamentally reimagined with the abandonment of conventional modernist understandings of water as H<sub>2</sub>O, a resource that can be owned and needs to be managed by states, private corporations and/or local communities. These perspectives encourage us to imagine our relationship with water in new ways and to think beyond membership of the commons as limited to humans. July Hazard's Waterfront Sonnets, which follow this introduction, are part of such deep ecological and political struggles, in this instance struggles taking place in Oakland, USA opposing the 'redevelopment', gentrification and privatisation of access to the water's edge of the city's Lake Merritt. For July, this shoreline is a 'fracture commons', a site of an assemblage of 'seepage, dumping, washing up, erosion, and elemental sorting that belie the bounded conception of bodies, and unravel them. Continental and oceanic bodies, political bodies, bodies of human and non-human beings scatter and reassemble themselves and one another'. Sometimes the keywords we inherit fail us and we need to tinker with them or invent new ones to think and talk about new circumstances. Donna Haraway (2015), who has been central to new materialist theorising, insists that we need new names not only for the toxic legacies of so-called development, but also for re-membered imaginable futures. The global water and related ecological crises that far exceed what is referred to as 'climate change' and have put the very future of the planet at stake, have necessitated the coining of words such as the 'Anthropocene', 'Capitalocene' and Haraway's 'Chthulucene'. In this vein, as will be seen in the article by Cleo Woelfle-Erskine, some have argued for a tinkering with and extension of the meaning of 'precarity' to include non-human species' life possibilities. Likewise, in her article, Róisín O'Gorman encourages us to recognise that we are 'hydro-hybrids'.

New political slogans are also needed for these new troubling times. Haraway's slogan 'Make kin!' stretches the imagination of kin to include relatives without ties of birth, both human and non-human others. Making kin with water, which demands intense responsibility, is a central theme in the article by Patrick Bresnihan in which he discusses the meaning of water as 'our relative'. The slogans 'Water IS life' and 'We are Water' used by the Standing Rock Water Protectors in USA and discussed in the article by Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan similarly attests to an assertion of an ontology of relatedness.

The radically different perceptual landscapes and new words and thinking tools emerging from some of the water politics considered in this Special Issue carry us beyond what many might regard as the community development canon. Ideas, such as multi-species relations or the agency of natural entities, implicit in the notion of river sovereignty (Cleo Woelfle-Erskine), are unsettling to conventional community development thinking. So too is the questioning of Western understandings of the individual and the suggestion that our bodies are highly porous and intimately connected to assemblages of human and non-human entities. The questions asked extend beyond those that have tended to preoccupy people in the world of community development. Likewise, the style of writing in many of the contributions to the Special Issue (e.g. sonnets (July Hazard), stories and conversations (Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan), and instructions for bodily exercises to heighten awareness of our human embodiment of water (Róisín O'Gorman)) departs from the usual conventions of

the *Community Development Journal*. But this is the very point that surfaces from many contemporary water struggles, that at a time when our collective ongoingness is in jeopardy, there is an urgent need to radically trouble and go beyond what have become conventional frameworks of thought and action. The Special Issue concludes with a response by Matt Scott on the implications of new materialist hydropolitics for community development. Matt is chair of the *Community Development Journal* editorial board and a community worker based in East London; he opens by noting that his response is informed by the urban redevelopment context in which he works, where, in the worldview of property developers, water has been transformed into the sales prop 'blue space'.

## **Remembering and re-membering water**

'Our movements in India are movements of remembering, remembering what this society is about, what our water culture is about, and how we can build a future on this'. This is how Vandana Shiva, the Indian eco-feminist and author of *Water Wars: Privatisation, Pollution, and Profit* (2016) describes the water movement of which she is part.<sup>2</sup> For her, the fundamental change in water culture in India is that people have become dislodged from the water cycle. Previously, she explains, 'we were very particular, remembering daily how much water comes into our ecosystem, how you should live to ensure you don't waste or pollute it. There were extremely strict cultural norms, such as, you don't shit next to a pond, you do not violate the banks of a river.' The understanding of water as a shared planetary gift resulted in strict community regulation of its usage. Shiva argues that the erosion of community, together with the intensification of consumer culture, have been part of the forgetting of these norms and the emergence of an understanding of water as a sink for waste. In Cristy Clark's article in this Special Issue, she describes community responses to life-threatening water disconnections in Johannesburg arising from people's refusal to have prepaid water metres installed. However, the water disconnection that worries Shiva is of a related but different order.

Not only are big corporations contributing to an industrial meaning of water, ordinary Indians are also forgetting the water conservation culture. The water crisis in India, according to Shiva, has nothing to do with levels of rainfall but is directly related to the culture of conservation, which is stronger in some parts of the country than others, with the latter experiencing water famines. For her, water scarcity in India is directly linked to models of development that do not take water and the limits of water renewal into consideration.

Vandana's contribution to the classic post-development text *The Development Dictionary* (Sachs, 1992, 2010) is a lengthy keywords analysis of 'resources'. She opens the essay as follows: 'Resource' originally implied life. Its root is the Latin verb *surgere*, which evoked the image of a spring that continually rises from the ground. ...The concept thus highlighted nature's power of self-regeneration and called attention to her prodigious creativity. (Shiva, 2010, p. 228). However, a conceptual break occurred with the advent of industrialism and colonialism, resulting in 'natural resources', including water, being reduced to those parts of nature which were required as inputs for industrial production and colonial trade.

Writing about the British colonial worldview during the time of the 19th century famines and the characterisation of the Irish as ‘bog trotters’, Tadhg Foley (2016) reminds us that bogs, ‘standing for atavism and backwardness, needed to be drained to become *terra firma* ... Drainage subdued the bogs, an essential component of the colonial mission to discipline, civilise, and make rational not only Irish people but Irish landscape’. From this perspective, the Irish were as unstable as water. A provocation presented by Chas Jewett, the Lakota water activist involved in the Standing Rock protests, in her article with Mark Garavan, is to become aware of the racist violence and trauma underpinning contemporary forms of colonialism and ‘development’. Against this background, the emphasis on the connections between much collective action around water and anti-colonial struggles in the article by Cleo Woelfle-Erskine is important. So too, in contexts such as US Left politics where he argues Indigenous erasure is endemic, is the assertion that decolonization is not just a metaphor, but requires the restoration of land (and water) to Indigenous peoples. In light of this attention to the connections between water and colonialism, it is important to question what are possibly Anglo-centric histories and meanings of the commons. The prevailing origin story of the co-operative movement has been challenged for offering a narrow Eurocentric, masculinist and colonizing understanding of co-operatives (Lee, Smallshaw and Peredo, 2017); might this also be the case with the origin story of the commons that begins with the enclosure of the English land commons? Following Chas Jewett’s point that the commons is not a keyword or even used by the Standing Rock water protectors, is it problematic to still try to understand that activism as a form of commoning?

The flush toilet is the perfect metaphor for a ‘developed’ consumer society, where people flush away their excrement and forget about it. So says the Mexican commons theorist Esteva (2014), who is a proponent of what David McDonald in his contribution to this Special Issue describes as ‘autonomous water commons’. A short essay by him titled ‘Refusal to Flush’ (no date) discusses how the flush toilet contributes to people forgetting water and washing their hands of the disposal of their own shit. It tells the story of the people of Tepito in Mexico City whose use of latrines and ecological toilets was a symbolic struggle, ‘resisting the temptation to wash their hands of problems by handing them to the professionals and bureaucrats’, and a refusal to forget. Mexico City is described as the most contaminated city in the world, where in the absence of an adequate sewage system and water supply for 20 million people, each day 5 million people defecate in the open air. Despite this, the people of Tepito received no official support for their latrines and refusal to flush. However, when in 1985 an earthquake destroyed much of the city centre’s sewage system ‘we, the so-called alternatives, marginal alternatives, were the only ones with the experience needed to rapidly remedy this collective predicament’, and the official attitude towards them changed. The learning from this episode, he argues, extended far beyond how to achieve cheap and appropriate sanitary conditions. For him, it was a reminder of ‘what it implied to have our intestines bound to a centralised and technocratic bureaucracy’. Furthermore, he reports ‘we learned a new type of relation between ourselves and our surroundings’, and the rivers and soils of Mexico City.

Resting on the hydro-hybrid understanding that human embodiment and water are inseparable, Esteva's understanding of the water commons presents a fundamental challenge to the Western conception of the individual as a sovereign discrete agent. Explaining this perspective on re-membering at a *Community Development Journal* Thinkery on the Commons,<sup>3</sup> he clarified 'It is not about me reconnecting with nature, but seeing that I am nature. We can illustrate this by asking if the air you have in your lungs right now, is it yours or you? Is it nature or is it you? No, it is the same, we cannot be separated. This idea of separation is an absurd construction' (O'Donovan, 2015, p. 751). For him, and new materialists, the radical separateness and self-sufficiency of the modern individual is an illusion.

Whatever about the tendency to forget water and wash one's hands of one's waste in the districts of Mexico City that are not serviced by a public sewage system, this tendency is significantly greater in parts of the world where flush toilets are completely the norm. People there who live in 'grotesquely opulent' conditions and whose water hungry consumption patterns are destroying the worlds of those who are 'grotesquely deprived' are especially likely to wash their hands of their waste (Esteva, Babones and Babicky, 2013, p. 30). Any of us in such parts of the world who on occasion have had deal with a water shut-off, or even a blocked toilet, are confronted with the stench of our ignorance and disconnection from water and the largely invisible sewage systems that lie beneath where we live.

The forgetting and disconnection from water that trouble Vandana Shiva and Gustavo Esteva are features of what the radical feminist Mary Daly (1993) describes as the Age of Dis-memberment. She uses the word *dis-memberment* to refer to the 'advanced stages of the demonic dis-ease of *fragmentation*'. The dis-ease of this Age is 'a condition which manifests itself in the multiplication of divisions within and among women – involves also the breaking down of nature by phallotechnocrats and the splitting of women from nature' (Daly, 1993, p. 9). It entails a loss of memories and knowledge and 'broken connections in our knowing, sensing and feeling'. Disrupting linear modernist temporalities, for Daly, the antidote to dis-memberment is a re-membering of our future and past, a dis-covering of our connections, interdependence and interwovenness with each other and nature. Significantly in the context of feminist analysis, in many cultures water is understood to be feminine. In the Irish language, for example, all the rivers of Ireland, bar one, are feminine. For some, this association between water and femininity is implicated in the patriarchal subordination of women and our boggy, leaky bodies. On a related note, Illich's (1986) *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* begins by noting that in the history of Western bourgeois life, the domestication of women and water coincided. Furthermore, the article by Cristy Clark emphasises the significance of the gender division of labour in many counties that make water the responsibility of women. As shown by her in respect of the installation of prepaid water metres in South Africa, these metres have gendered consequences where women are responsible for domestic work that requires water and who have to walk long distances in search of water when their credit is used up.



Forgetting and dis-memberment from water has not, however, been universal. The community managed water supplies in Ireland known as Group Water Schemes, that emerged due to state neglect of rural areas are one example of where remembering water has been a necessity (see the article by Patrick Bresnihan). Faced with the deterioration of drinking water quality, largely due to agricultural pollution, re-membering water has become increasingly unavoidable for members of these Group Water Schemes who engage in a form of unspectacular water politics in which the global and entangled sources of water contamination are more and more apparent. Also, more-than-human politics has a long history in some parts of the globe. As noted by Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan in their article 'For many the words 'water is life' are not an aspiration or claim – it is simply an empirical fact. Water is not to be 'managed'. It is to be related to'.

### **The Western history of water**

In the modern science of chemistry, as in hydraulic engineering, all water is H<sub>2</sub>O. However, for others, such as Illich (1986), it is not a monolithic substance and there are many waters, for example, the waters that break at birth, recycled toilet flush, industrial water, mossy spring water, healing water and mystical water from a holy well. Illich recognises the crucial significance of remembering water in the sense of being collectively and individually mindful not to waste and pollute it, but his is a call for attention to how we understand and relate to the stuff itself. For him, it is not 'water as a commodity that is at issue, nor its waste, its pollution, the ecological consequences of its irresponsible extraction, the biological consequences of poisoning it, or even its maldistribution ... These are also crucial issues, but they deal with water in a different sense' (Illich, 1986, p. 11).

Beginning with ancient Greece, Illich's history of prevailing Western ways of imagining water argues that the idea of water as something that circulates that emerged in the 18th century marked a profound break with the past in which the mystical quality of water was emphasised. Attributed to the physician William Harvey, blood was the first liquid to which circulation was ascribed, the function of which was in part to wash out waste material. Around this time liquidity emerged as a prominent metaphor, where ideas, newspapers, traffic and the like 'circulated'. Just as a modern imagination of the body emerged as it came to be understood in new mechanistic ways with the postulation of blood circulation by the emerging medical profession of the time, the city too was reimagined with the emerging public health imperative of public sanitation services. Similar to the individual body 'the social body, the city was now also described as a network of pipes' in which 'water must incessantly circulate, leaving it again as dirty sewage' (Illich, 1986, p. 45). Prior to this time, cities were generally accepted as smelly places, but by the 19th century, according to Illich, the 'utopia of the odourless city' had emerged. Likewise, the modern odourless body and 'cleanly individualism' became imperatives. Shitting became a 'private closeted affair' and a 'private bed, stool, and grave became requisites of a citizen's dignity' (Illich, 1986, p. 60). Split from the mind, the body became a machine and the 'new individual' was compelled 'to stay within the bounds of his or her own skin'. In a similar vein, for feminists, our 'leaky bodies' have been the focus of analysis of the subordination of women in Western discourses,

such as biomedicine (Shildrick, 1997). But, as exemplified by the hydrofeminism of Astrida Neimanis (2012), this 'leakiness' has formed the ground of a feminist ethic. The history of water is thus intimately bound up with the history of the patriarchal Western idea of the sovereign individual and the body as bounded and self-contained.

Charting the disconnection from water in consumer capitalism, Illich (1986, p. 75) claims that by the mid-20th century, many people in so-called developed countries, such as the US, had 'learned to abstain from drinking water unless it came from an approved faucet or bottle. Bathing in unchlorinated brooks and drinking from untested fountains became, for many people, a memory of scouting during childhood or the reminder of a romantic past'. However, this disconnection was finalised when many even stopped drinking tap water, at which point the 'transformation of H<sub>2</sub>O into a cleaning fluid was complete'. By the end of the 20th century, in the prevailing social imagination, despite the same word having been used for centuries, the meaning of water had changed radically. It had lost its mystical and spiritual powers and been reduced to an asocial industrial detergent, a scarce resource that requires technical management. 'Modern water' became taken for granted, a meaning that 'abstracts all waters from the social, historical, and local conditions in which they are produced and reduces them to a common abstract and timeless identity, which can be represented as 'H<sub>2</sub>O' and shown as circulating in the hydrological cycle' (Linton, 2014, p. 111). Having once been associated with the sacred and purifying, with its modern meaning and the watery Anthropocentric consequences of its destruction, water is increasingly understood as a threatening malevolent force that requires expert management.

### **Challenges for community water politics**

From the perspective of Illich's analysis, the challenge facing communities mobilized around water are twofold. The first is to remember water by being attentive to its wastage, pollution and unequal distribution. As discussed in the article by Patrick Bresnihan, for water justice activists involved with the Catalan organisation Aigua es Vida, a first step towards the remunicipalization of water, has been reclaiming knowledge about the water system in the region and acquiring a water literacy. One focus of this knowledge could be water's global and stark maldistribution. In the article by Cristy Clark, we read about opposition to the introduction of prepaid water metres in South Africa, where there is a free basic water allocation of just 25 litres per person per day. In Ireland, where the introduction of water metres was vehemently opposed and stopped, only household water usage over 213,000 litres per year (583 litres per day) is deemed excessive and liable for charges (Irish Water, 2018). The call to remember water from the 'elemental philosopher' David Macauley (2010, p. 2) is call for *anamnesis*, a recovery of the memory of the four classical elements of earth, air, fire and water. Though physically close, the elements often 'remain existentially remote, covered over, or concealed', as illustrated by the images of water drain covers (that 'hide yet point to water') on the city streets in Cork in Róisín O'Gorman's article in this Special Issue. In her discussion of the movement based community arts project Global Water Dances, Róisín considers how this project promotes *anamnesis*, arguing 'if we miss out on the playful, sensuous, pleasurable encounters with/as water as well as the mundane and everyday aspects

of our interactions with water, we miss out on fundamental water qualities that influence our daily lives with and as water-based beings’.

The second challenge is to re-member water, to imagine it as much more than an asocial cleaning agent and to dis-cover our connectedness with it. This radical re-membering mode of water politics finds expression in the slogans ‘Water is Life’ and ‘We are Water’ used by water campaigners, such as the Standing Rock Water Protectors in USA (see the article by Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan). These slogans attest to a fundamental mismatch between the modern H<sub>2</sub>O understanding of water, with its emphasis on water engineering and management, and the meaning of water espoused by those involved in some contemporary water anti-privatisation struggles who emphasise our watery entanglements.

In a discussion of discontents arising from the modern meaning of water, the Canadian geographer Jamie Linton (2014) addresses how it tends to be associated with a reliance on technical engineering expertise to resolve all water-related issues. However, in conflicts over water this has become increasingly untenable, resulting in international official recognition of the need for a ‘more engaged practice of social negotiation’ known as Integrated Water Resources Management (Linton, 2014). Officially sanctioned at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, this stakeholder approach recognises a role for community participation in water management. Some of its proponents assert that water ‘should be recognized as a tool for community development ... Water can have an overreaching value capable of coalescing conflicting interests and facilitating consensus building among societies. ... a process for cooperative watershed management is vital’ (Rahaman and Varis, 2005, p.19). There is by now an extensive body of literature on how marginalised communities can be empowered to engage as stakeholders in Water Resources Management (see for example Butler and Adamowski, 2015). However, such moves retain the modern understanding of water as a resource to be managed, and are a far cry from the calls to re-member water discussed above. The research, ideas and practices associated with new materialisms offer a radically different form of community hydropolitics.

### **The emancipatory potentials of new materialist water politics?**

‘No species’, asserts Donna Haraway (2015, p. 159), ‘not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too’. So, here we have it, two of the central ideas in new materialist thinking. To understand history and social action, we need to start thinking about interconnected assemblages rather than disconnected individuals, and we need to abandon arrogant anthropocentric outlooks that see only the human. For Haraway, the denial of these in Western thought is what has led to the era of ‘cheap nature’ being over and the emergence of the Anthropocene that has witnessed the immense and irreversible ‘destruction of places and times of refuge for people and other critters’. For her, at a time when ‘ongoingness is at stake’, our collective responsibility is to make the Anthropocene as brief as possible. The new epoch that she imagines and calls the Chthulucene may only be possible ‘with intense

commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multi-species assemblages that include people' (Haraway, 2015, p. 160). Her call to 'make kin' with human and non-human entities, envisages a meaning of family (but also community and commons) far beyond those with whom we have ties of species, ancestry and genealogy. This way of thinking about the water commons is central to a number of the articles in this Special Issue. Emphasising a relational and multi-species understanding of the commons, Patrick Bresnihan supports calls to understand it as a verb, where 'commoning' refers to 'the making and re-making of mutualistic and reciprocal relations with human and non-human others'. Consistent with another central idea in new materialism that everything (including the meaning of keywords) is in a state of becoming, in his article, Cleo Woelfle-Erskine stresses the experimental character of the commons, which 'as ongoing and variable, helps us to think and feel our way beyond the current, urgent claims to preserve a finite planet' (Bresnihan, 2013, p. 88). Similarly, as argued by Róisín O'Gorman, the emancipatory potentials of experimental movement based community arts, such as the Global Water Dances, aimed at cultivating a sensibility of our interrelated hydro-hybrid selves, remains to be decided. Matt Scott's response acknowledges that, 'the writing in this Special Issue does not offer concise, easy to follow emancipatory systems of thought. It does not spell out in detail how change happens.' Much remains to be seen about the political potentials and pitfalls of re-membling, new materialist meanings of water, and the task now is to develop these ideas into more applicable forms of collective action in a contested world. But what is made clear by the contributions to this Special Issue is that they open up new and radically different possibilities for doing and thinking about water anti-privatisation struggles and the commons. As suggested in the quotation from Astrida Neimanis (2012, p. 96) included in Róisín's article and reiterated below, this project of imagining water in new ways can unmoor us in potentially productive ways.

Not only does water connect us, gestate us, sustain us—more than this water disturbs the very categories that ground the domains of social, political, philosophical and environmental thought and those of feminist theory and practice as well. Thinking about ourselves and our broader communities as watery can thus unmoor us in productive (albeit sometimes risky) ways. We are set adrift in the space-time between our certainties, between the various outcrops we cling to for security.

#### Footnotes

1

See <http://keywords.pitt.edu/index.html>

2

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIH0ZiRRU5U>

3

See <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/cdj/resources/commons/videos/>

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